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ABSTRACT

A technique for critiquing secondary and college level students' photography is described. The structure of the students' photography assignment should include the following categories of information: (1) artist's intention; (2) subject; (3) technique; (4) composition; (5) miscellaneous considerations, such as mood and symbol; and (6) presentation--matting and framing craftsmanship. The student is asked to consider plans and options in each category and to provide written narratives. The instrument for the critiquing process is constructed as a Likert scale. The student responds to statements about the photograph and records a number corresponding to that response on the chart. The statements are organized under four categories that correspond to the categories in the assignment plan. They are intention, subject, technique, and composition. The instrument is especially effective with elective students and with those students who do not have extensive prior experience in art or photography. The scale can be used by the teacher to critique student work, by the student for self-critique, and by a group of students to evaluate one another's work. (RM)

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A STRUCTURE FOR THE CRITIQUE OF STUDENT PHOTOGRAPHS

A paper presented at the twenty-fifth annual
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A Structure for the Critique of Student Photographs

Having originated in the 1830's, photography is one of the last art forms to be developed. Accordingly, photography is one of the last media to be introduced into the schools. Not only do teachers need to be concerned with devising teaching methods and strategies for photography, but teachers also need to develop ways to evaluate student work. This paper might well have been titled, "Raters of the Last Art," but it is not. Rather, this paper offers a systematic means for the evaluation and critique of student photographs.

I avoid the term evaluation of student art work. It connotes a one-sided process coldly conducted by an authority using a set of fixed criteria as reference points. I prefer instead the term critique in its traditional form of a rather open-ended group discussion of the student's work by the teacher, the student, and the student's peers. This paper presents an instrument designed to aid in the process of critiquing student photographs. It has been used successfully with both high school and college age groups of basic photography students including both art majors and elective students.

Critiquing (an awkward work, but validated by Webster nevertheless) is best conceived as a 2-way communication process that is itself part of the creative process. Ideally, the critique should be an instructional tool that offers a learning experience that incorporates the learner's characteristics, the properties of the art medium, and the instructional objectives. It seems that little research has been carried out on the critique as an instructional tool in art education.

The ideas offered here are intended simply to provide a tool with which to organize, facilitate, and perhaps even reconcile the creative process and the instructional process. The structured approach to critiquing student

photographs seeks to establish a degree of objectivity and quantifiability. This last word may be a feather ruffler on the grounds that art is essentially subjective and attempts to quantify it are irrelevant and even dangerously heretical. I agree in part. While art itself may be, in the final analysis, immune to objectivity and quantification, art learning and art instruction are not. The main hypothesis, then, is that objectivity, specificity, and quantification--to a degree and properly applied--can lead to good things in art learning and art instruction, which in turn can lead to art.

A number of premises and assumptions guided the design of this instrument. Among them are the following points.

(1) Systematic, post facto evaluation is a natural step in the creative and productive process.

(2) Objective critiquing can help the student visualize and then generate new ideas in subsequent projects. Internal schema are established that will guide later art production. Post facto becomes a priori.

(3) The most effective critiques are based on the formal properties of the medium and recapitulate the steps in the creative productive process.

(4) There is--or at least should be--substantial integration of productive skills and critical skills in art instruction and in the creative process. The structure of the critique presented here assumes that both productive and critical skills are essential to making art and that they are highly interrelated and operate simultaneously in reality. They are exclusive, discrete entities only in the literature, not in practice.

The systematic approach to critiquing student photographs actually begins when the assignment is introduced. The source of the assignment may be varied. It can come from the student, the teacher, or other sources. The structure of the assignment is what is important. It should include the following categories of information: (1) artist's intention, (2) subject, (3) technique, (4) composition, (5) miscellaneous considerations, such as mood, symbol, etc., and (6) presentation - matting and framing craftsmanship.

The intention category, for most general purposes, includes aesthetic, commercial, and journalistic dimensions. Although at the philosophical level, distinctions between these are imperfect, the three seem to be useful for instructional purposes with basic photography students. The point is to make the student consciously decide and commit to an approach. I use the following common parlance definitions:

(1) aesthetic intention--art for art's sake; photography for expressive or even decorative purposes;

(2) commercial intention--photography done as a product to sell and done to someone else's specifications;

(3) journalistic intention--photography for the purpose of communicating both visual and verbal information about an event, place, time, or person.

The subject category includes simply the objects that the photographer wants to photograph. A simple narrative description or list is an appropriate beginning here.

The technique category includes the mechanical or manipulative processes that the student is concerned with or likely to encounter. Projected equipment and materials needs should also be included here. Consideration of this category may reveal the need for additional activities prior to beginning the assignment, such as acquiring a new skill or item of equipment.

The composition category is perhaps the most difficult for students to consider. Typically, it is the one which receives the least response. However, it is included to get the student thinking about how to handle the often overwhelming multiplicity of options that appear in the camera's viewfinder. It is important to call the student's attention to the possibilities offered by thinking in terms of the elements and principles of design. (Photographers stubbornly refer to desgin as "composition.") This category can also be the starting point for an assignment. For example, the student may conceive of an assignment to create photographs which emphasize line as a unifying concept.

Treating subject as a secondary concern and treating photographs as two-dimensional arrangements of shapes, lines, patterns, and tones is an important step in learning the art of seeing and the art of photography.

The miscellaneous category is a catch-all for any comments that the student may wish to make. Considerations about style, idea, theme, genre, mood, emotion, symbol, influences, relevant reading are examples.

The student is asked to consider options, plans, etc., in each category and provide written narrative. This may be expanded later into a journal or aesthetic statement. It is not always essential that every category be addressed or that it be filled with tightly-woven, locked-in plans to function later as blueprints. Rather, thoughtful consideration of possibilities is all that is necessary.

It may be a plan to have a non-plan. For example, the student may conceive of an assignment to react spontaneously to sense of place, light, motion, etc. On the other hand, some technically sophisticated special effects require detailed, super Teutonic planning.

Ideally, the student and the teacher would develop the assignment plan together. By making the planning a conscious decision-making process, a foundation is laid for both the creative/productive process and the critique.

The instrument for the critiquing process is constructed as a Likert scale. The student responds to statements about the photograph and records a number corresponding to that response on the chart. The statements are organized under four categories. These correspond to categories in the assignment plan. They are intention, subject, technique, and composition. These categories and their subsumed questions recapitulate steps in the decision making aspects of the creative/productive process.

There are a number of general observations I would like to make con-

cerning this instrument, its use, and its implications. Some of these are rationally based, while others are anecdotally based in my own and others' experience with it.

The first is that this instrument, or another like it, is especially effective with elective students and those students who do not have extensive prior experience in art or photography. The noted photography critic, A.D. Coleman writes in Light Readings, (1979), that we are beginning to experience an acceleration in the "breakdown of the traditional distinction between amateur and serious photographers," (p. 277). Indeed, democratizing photography and other art media should be a goal of art in the mainstream. This means making studio art courses accessible to a group of new students composed of elective students and non-traditional and even recreational students. We may also see a breakdown of the traditional distinction between productive skills and critical/appreciative skills. If we are seeking to involve greater numbers and a more diverse cross section of students in studio courses such as photography, we will have to adapt some of our instructional strategies and tools. These adaptations need not dilute the total art experience for the new student. Instead, instructional strategies and tools can be devised that provide gradual transitions from territories familiar to the student to the newer ways of operating in studio art courses such as photography. Such students are often extraordinarily grade conscious, a condition which is amplified even more by being in a studio art course which is traditionally the province of the talented elite. The new student, however, is used to having a quantifiable grade that describes their status. Abruptly kicking them out of the nest can be an impediment to learning. At the basic level, using a systematic instrument that is quantifiable helps provide a familiar element of transition that can be an asset in the affective aspects of art instruction.

Also, very often the new art student has had the notion previously inculcated that responding to and evaluating art is totally subjective and that virtually anything can be aesthetically valid because there are no clear objective standards. If the student's attitude is not quite that extreme, then it is usually at least described as mystified by the problems of critiquing. Providing students with a system that is at least partially objective can lay the foundation for later development of critical skills. It can do this by showing the student that critical and appreciative concerns should include specifics about the formal and technical properties of the medium.

The rating scale can also be prescriptive. Many items on the scale relate to specific skills that the student can be directed to work on for improvement. This can occur under the student's own power if the rating scale is used for self-evaluation prior to the final critique while the project is still underway. A short conference with the instructor or even other students while the work is in progress can be effective. In this way, the instrument can be a tool for formative evaluation. Used formatively, the rating scale comes closer to the goal of actually facilitating learning instead of just grading it.

By offering quantifiability, this instrument or a similar one can provide data for certain research topics. Pretest, treatment, posttest designs could be employed to study a number of variables such as student performance in relation to cognitive style, creativity, IQ, etc.

The rating scale can be a multipurpose communication tool in instruction. The scale can be used by the teacher to critique student work, by the student for self-critique, by a group of students to evaluate one anothers' work. In all cases, the scale can be used formatively or summatively. Also, the

scale can be applied to photographs other than those done by students. For example, appreciative skills can be developed by using the scale to look at master artists' photographs.

Another observation is that using the rating scale in a critique requires active participation rather than a passive response from the student. The active role seems to involve the student in more positive ways than what is afforded by the type of critique in which an expert delivers a monologue or makes demands upon the student to justify various details. Dewey used the term "work of art" to mean not the object but rather the active perception and critical appreciation of the art object, (Art As Experience, 1934). In this way, conducting a critique using a rating scale as a major component provides a structure for the "work" that extends beyond the process of making the art object into the area of perception and cognition. Critiquing systematically and with specificity can provide photography students with what Dewey called "re-education of the perception," (Art As Experience, 1934). This should lead the student to a level of creative consciousness in photography at which new ideas can flow from an examination of the old.

References

Coleman, A.D. (1979). Light Readings. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dewey, J. (1934). Art As Experience. New York: Minton, Balch, and Co.

PHOTOGRAPH RATING SCALE

Directions: This instrument is to be used as a tool which provides one step towards the goals of gaining more objectivity in the evaluation process and of identifying specific ways for the student to improve. There are other important steps in the evaluation process. In the column below each photograph number, record the response number that most accurately expresses the applicability of the statement to the photograph.

Key

STRONGLY AGREE 5
AGREE 4
UNDECIDED 3
DISAGREE 2
STRONGLY DISAGREE 1

	Photograph # 1	2	3
Intention			
1. The photograph clearly expresses the artist's intention; i.e., journalistic, commercial, or aesthetic.	___	___	___
Subject			
2. The subject is clearly defined.	___	___	___
3. The subject is one with inherent interest.	___	___	___
Technique			
4. The photograph is in focus.	___	___	___
5. The photograph is exposed correctly.	___	___	___
6. There is sufficient detail in the important shadows and highlights.	___	___	___
7. The photograph has adequate contrast.	___	___	___
8. The photograph is free of dust spots, scratches, and other blemishes.	___	___	___
Composition			
9. Background and foreground details do not detract from subject.	___	___	___
10. The composition is one thing that makes the photograph interesting.	___	___	___
11. The photograph uses shapes, lines, patterns, and tones effectively.	___	___	___
12. There is a main point of emphasis.	___	___	___
13. Placement of the elements contributes to the effectiveness of the photograph.	___	___	___
14. The photograph conveys a unifying concept, theme, idea, symbol, or style.	___	___	___
15. The photograph is interesting and has impact.	___	___	___